NEW YORK MEDICAL COLLEGE
FLOWER AND FIFTH AVENUE HOSPITALS
FIFTH AVENUE AT ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTH STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10029

OFFICE OF THE DEAN

November 19, 1965

Doctor Joshua Lederberg
Department of Genetics
Stanford University School of Medicine
Palo Alto, California 94304

Dear Doctor Lederberg,

I am attaching a little statement that R. J. Dubos published about Avery in 1956 shortly after his death.

Enclosed is a picture copied from a lantern slide. This shows Avery about an hour after he told me the whole story of the transforming factor and described his evidence that the responsible agent was desoxyribonucleic acid. You will note the smile on Avery's face and the cigarette in his right hand. The explanation of this cigarette is that the snapshot was made on Sunday after lunch at our home in Bedford, New York. On any other day of the week there would probably have been a platinum loop in the position occupied by the cigarette. The quiet contentment of Avery on that Sunday gave the message "I've discovered a phenomenon of Nature so exquisitely beautiful that I dare not talk about it except to those with whom I commune".

I also enclose a picture copied from a lantern slide made a few years after Fred Griffith had done his original work on transformation. This was taken of the "leprechaun" (this tiny man seemed one to me perhaps because he hardly ever spoke above a whisper) with his Irish Terrier, Bobby, on the Downs near Brighton, England. Believe it or not, Griffith, who was one of Englands most conservative scientist, built himself a home in Brighton more modern in architecture than anything in Beverly Hills. As you probably know, Griffith and his good man Friday (Scott) were killed by the direct hit of a bomb just after London was presumably freed of bombing. The only survivor was Bobby, shown in this picture.

In closing, let me say that being unable to present Avery with the Legion of Honor, I gave him a copy of this poor snapshot of Fred Griffith, which he always kept on his desk in front of him from 1942 to 1955.

Sincerely,

Alvin F. Coburn, M.D.

AFC/fr
enc. 3

To the best of my knowledge Fess Avery and Fred Griffith never met.

COBURN

"Avery was at that time suffering from Graves's disease and soon was compelled to leave the laboratory for some six months. When he returned in the fall of 1932 new evidence had come to light in favour of Griffith's claims; the results had been duplicated by Neufeld in Germany and at the Rockefeller Institute Hospital by M. H. Dawson. It was with reluctance that Avery eventually accepted that pneumococci could be made at will to undergo transmissible hereditary changes in immunological specificity. But once he had accepted the new phenomenon he immediately visualized its far reaching implications not only for bacteriology and genetics, but also for general biology and medicine. He was then approaching 60 years of age and many felt that he had shot his bolt. Yet it was during this last phase of his life, and in part after his official retirement, that he made the discovery that may well prove to be his most important achievement -- indeed one of the milestones of experimental biology.

He first proceeded to separate from capsulated pneumococci a soluble fraction capable of bringing about the change of type in vitro. Enlisting as he had so often done in the past the enthusiastic interest of younger collaborators, he soon obtained a highly purified fraction that could transfer to non-capsulated variants and to their progeny the hereditary property to produce the capsular polysaccharide of the strain used for the preparation of the extract. The climax of this study, and of his scientific career, was the demonstration that the substance responsible for the hereditary alteration of the cell was a desoxyribonucleic acid!"